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Friends of the Earth
Les Amis de la Terre
Amigos de la Tierra

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STATEMENT BY JOHN HONTELEZ, CHAIRMAN FRIENDS OF THE EARTH INTERNATIONAL AT THE 50th SESSION OF THE UNITED NATIONS COMMISSION ON HUMAN RIGHTS

Geneva, 15th February, 1995

Mr. Chairman,

I am grateful for the opportunity to address this Commission on behalf of Friends of the Earth International.

My name is John Hontelez, chairman of Friends of the Earth International. FoEI is a worldwide federation of national environmental organisations in 51 countries.

We support the proposal of the sub-commission (on prevention of discrimination and protection of minorities) to appoint a special rapporteur on human rights and the environment. Environmental degradation forms a major problem for humanity, and even more so for people who are poor and have no possibility of raising environmental issues freely and in a democratic context. The freedom to organise oneself freely to take care of the environment, to publish information about acts against the environment by governments, business and others, and to promote economic and political change in order to improve the environment, forms a crucial part of sustainable development, an objective agreed upon by most countries of the world at the Rio Summit in 1992.

Such opportunities do not exist everywhere. Last year our organisation tried to send an environmental mission to East Timor. One of the main aims of the mission was to establish and strengthen relationships between local NGOs and international NGOs, as well as to facilitate the building of the institutional capacity of a local environmental movement. It would focus on concrete opportunities for strengthening collaboration at the NGO level and also provide a basis for international cooperation aimed at a sustainable use of natural resources with the active involvement of local communities.

In May 1994 we requested the Indonesian Ministry of Foreign Affairs for permission to send an environmental mission to East Timor. We explained the purpose of our mission, being a report that "will offer a broad and updated view on the state of the environment in East Timor, as well as about the process of people's participation in sustainable development".

Friends of the Earth International (FoEI) is a federation of organisations from all over the world who are campaigning to protect the environment.

FoEI is registered in Amsterdam under number K535220

We explained that the mission was well prepared and that the team was composed of an Italian team-leader, a Brazilian sociologist, a Sri Lankean or British biologist and two members of our Indonesian member organisation WALHI. The report of the mission would be circulated to the relevant Indonesian authorities, international organisations, and to local and international NGOs working on environment and development.

In July we received an invitation to "reconsider our request" from the Indonesian Ministry. The reason given was that "comprehensive academic research" had already been done in East Timor on the issues the mission intended to focus on.

In November we repeated our request. We emphasised that while recognising the value of the work already done, "our mission is complementary especially because (..) we would like to focus on concrete opportunities for strengthening collaboration at the NGO level and also provide a basis for international cooperation aimed at a sustainable use of natural resources with the active involvement of local communities."

In addition, we also put forward an argument based on principle: I wrote; "I have serious problems with your response in the sense that it shows hesitation in allowing an international mission to East Timor. My organisation is of the opinion that it is in line with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights that East Timor can be visited freely by organisations like ours. (..) A refusal from your side would throw a peculiar light on Indonesia's hospitality and would force the international movement of environmental NGOs to draw conclusions about East Timor which would not be based on an independent assessment of the issues but on hearsay and on a secretive and defensive attitude of the Indonesian authorities. We trust that it is not your intention to allow this to happen."

However, the Indonesian authorities did choose to refuse our second request as well. We protest against this and request the UN Commission on Human Rights to join us in protest, as we consider it unacceptable that the Indonesian Authorities will not allow us to visit East Timor freely. Even more so because Indonesia is in fact occupying this country against the will of the majority of its population and without the approval of the United Nations.

We trust the continued attention by the Commission of Human Rights for East Timor and the appointment of a Special Rapporteur on Human Rights and the environment will help us in assisting the East Timorese people to fight and work for a sustainable future.

Mr. Chairman, distinguished delegates, thank you for your attention.